DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 456 673 FL 026 924

AUTHOR Tucker, G. Richard; Donato, Richard
TITLE Implementing a District-Wide Foreign Language Program: A Case Study of Acquisition, Planning, and Curricular Innovation. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-FL-01-03
PUB DATE 2001-09-00
NOTE 4p.
CONTRACT ED-99-CO-0008
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, 4646 40th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20016. Tel: 202-362-0700; For full text: http://www.cal.org/ericcll/digest.
PUB TYPE ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Articulation (Education); Cooperation; Elementary Education; *FLES; Language Proficiency; Program Descriptions; *Program Development; *Program Implementation; *Reflective Teaching; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; Spanish
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest describes the implementation of a successful district-wide elementary school foreign language (FLES) program that resulted from the superintendent's vision to have all students in the district study a common foreign language throughout their schooling. This vision was based on the superintendent's belief that American secondary school graduates in the 21st century will be competing for positions in which bilingual language proficiency will offer a considerable advantage. The digest highlights five overarching themes believed to be key to the success of the program: careful and collaborative planning and evaluation; gradual program expansion; attention to progress in proficiency; high quality foreign language faculty; and reflective practitioners. (VWL)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 456 673

ERIC DIGEST

EDO-FL-01-03 • SEPTEMBER 2001

Implementing a District-Wide Foreign Language Program

A Case Study of Acquisition, Planning, and Curricular Innovation

G. RICHARD TUCKER, CARNEGIE MELLON UNIVERSITY & RICHARD DONATO, UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

FL 026 924

 BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Implementing a District-Wide Foreign Language Program

A Case Study of Acquisition, Planning, and Curricular Innovation

G. RICHARD TUCKER, CARNEGIE MELLON UNIVERSITY & RICHARD DONATO, UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

Recent federal legislation has called for American students leaving Grades 4, 8, and 12 to demonstrate competence in challenging subject matter, including foreign languages. If American students are to complete these grades with demonstrable proficiency in a foreign language, language programs at all levels will need to be significantly expanded and improved. This is particularly true at the elementary school level. The importance of including foreign language study in the elementary school is supported by research on the amount of instructional time required to develop functional proficiency in a foreign language (Carroll, 1967) and by the widely held professional view that language competence can only be achieved by children who follow articulated, sustained sequences of foreign language instruction (Donato & Terry, 1995).

This digest describes the implementation of a successful district-wide elementary school foreign language (FLES) program that resulted from the superintendent's vision to have all students in the district study a common foreign language throughout their schooling. This vision was based on the superintendent's belief that American secondary school graduates in the 21st century will be competing for positions in which bilingual language proficiency will offer a considerable advantage. This digest highlights five overarching themes believed to be key to the success of the program.

Program Evolution

In 1996, the Chartiers Valley Public School District in suburban Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, implemented a FLES program in all 11 of its kindergarten programs. The school system is relatively small, comprised mostly of students from European-American working-class families.

The project began when researchers from Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Pittsburgh met informally with the Chartiers Valley County School superintendent in May 1995 to discuss his vision for foreign languages in the district. A number of questions were raised at the meeting: Was the vision plausible? Which language would be offered? Was there community support? Could the school district and the universities work collaboratively to their mutual benefit? Would the school board provide the necessary budgetary authorization? The meeting marked the beginning of a mutually beneficial university-school district partnership and resulted in the formation of a foreign language program committee that would oversee the planning and eventual implementation of the program. Two of the committee's initial tasks were to decide which foreign language to choose for instruction and at what grade level to begin the program.

Choice of language. Several options were considered, including French, German, Japanese, and Spanish. A number of factors were evaluated, such as the availability of certified teachers and appropriate materials, potential community support, and perceived utility of proficiency in the target language. For pragmatic reasons, the committee opted to select only one language and to make its study compulsory for all children. The committee agreed to conduct a community survey to determine the level of support for such a program and to gather feedback concerning the choice of a foreign language. The survey was administered to a representative sample of parents and to all members of the school board. Results of the survey indicated broad general support for a foreign language program and specifically for the teaching of Spanish. Data also showed preference for a program that aimed at developing cultural knowledge, engaging students in the excitement of language learning, and building basic language proficiency.

Where to start. The second major question was whether to begin the program from the bottom up—that is, from kindergarten—or from the top down, working backwards a year at a time from Grade 9, where foreign language instruction in the school district then began.

After considerable discussion on issues such as scheduling, teacher availability, and the necessity of developing long-term articulation, the decision was made to propose to the school board the implementation of a Spanish FLES program that would begin in September 1996 for all district kindergartners. The proposal recommended extending the program one grade level each year. That is, all kindergartners and first graders would be required to participate in the program in the 1997-1998 school year; all kindergartners, first and second graders in the 1998-1999 school year; and so on. The Board of School Directors formally approved the plan and authorized a 5-year pilot project.

The next steps involved recruiting an appropriately certified teacher for the first cohort of students, planning for curriculum development activities, informing community members about the new program, and systematically providing other teachers and administrators working in the system with information about the program.

Incorporating the Spanish Program into the Core Curriculum

The Spanish program began in September 1996 in all kindergarten classes in the district, comprising a total of 223 students. Each class met for 20 minutes a day, 5 days a week. The Spanish specialist, who was certified in both foreign language education and elementary education, worked with students in their regular classrooms, and in effect team-taught with the regular classroom teachers. In the first year, a strong collaboration between the kindergarten teachers and the language specialist developed almost immediately, a collaborative style that has continued with each grade that has been added.

The curriculum was developed following the school-district template for planned courses of study; that is, each thematically organized unit was specified according to (1) student learning outcomes; (2) content, materials, and activities; and (3)procedures for assessment. The main focus of each lesson was on vocabulary building and comprehension. Every attempt was made to integrate Spanish with ongoing activities in art, music, library, physical education, and the computer curriculum.

Expansion Through the Primary, Intermediate, and Middle School Levels

The foreign language program committee continued to meet quarterly to discuss various aspects of the program and to plan for its expansion in the 1997-1998 school year. Plans for the second year followed the same model used during the first year, namely 20 minutes of instruction in Spanish 5 days a week with a specialist

FL024934

teacher who came to the classroom. The curriculum for the second year built on concepts and vocabulary learned during the first year and retained its integrated, thematic focus, but moved toward greater oral participation by the students. The same model was followed for the 1998-1999 school year with the addition of a second dually certified (in elementary and foreign language education) teacher as the program expanded to include all students from kindergarten through Grade 2. During the 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 school years, the committee addressed a number of issues, including the expansion to Grade 3 and Grade 4 and the need to begin the process of thinking carefully about the expansion that will occur in 2002-2003 into the middle school.

Themes of Success: A Model for Other Districts and the Nation

Several features of the program at Chartiers Valley are considered key to its success.

Careful and collaborative planning and evaluation. A hallmark of the program has been the overarching concern for careful and collaborative planning and evaluation each year as the program expands. Advance planning has been a distinguishing characteristic of the program, one that is often lacking in the implementation of FLES programs (see Curtain & Dahlberg, 2000).

Gradual program expansion. Consonant with the theme of careful planning, program expansion occurs one year at a time. This allows for the development of a well-articulated curriculum based on annual assessment of students' expanding abilities.

Attention to progress in proficiency. An overriding concern of the program is this: that as students progress through the program, they should also progress in their linguistic and cultural knowledge. Observations of early language programs often reveal that children are faced with repetitions of the same content presented in the same way from one year to the next. The program in Chartiers Valley has been careful to avoid this problem.

High quality foreign language faculty. Each year, as the program expands to another grade, an additional teacher is hired with certification in both foreign language and elementary education. Hiring only high quality, well-prepared teachers who understand both second language acquisition and how children learn helps to ensure the success of the program.

Reflective practitioners. Closely related to teacher qualifications is teachers' orientation to their work. Teachers in the Chartiers Valley program are reflective practitioners who make instructional decisions and modifications based on classroom observation and practice.

Collaborating on Curricular Innovation

To gain insight into the opinions of those who collaborated in the design and implementation of the program—the superintendent, school board members, principals, regular classroom teachers, and Spanish teachers—an interview protocol was developed to examine their perspectives on their experience. All participants expressed remarkable enthusiasm and considered the program a success. During analysis of the interview data, several overarching and consistent themes emerged.

Articulating a shared vision. The superintendent wanted a foreign language program for the Chartiers Valley School District, "because of a sense that American education was behind [the rest of the world] with regard to exposure to foreign languages." From the time he first proposed the idea of a foreign language program as part of the district's plans, his vision resonated positively throughout the committee overseeing implementation of the program.

Careful planning. The success of the program has been due in large part to the careful planning devoted to its development and implementation. Crucial to this planning was the involvement of all stakeholders, who were continually encouraged to voice their opinions and concerns.

Empowerment. There was a unanimous feeling of ownership for the program among survey respondents. This empowerment felt by teachers, department heads, principals, and others was attributed to the superintendent's strong leadership.

Support of and for the teachers. Another central thread woven throughout the interviews was that of support of and for the teachers. For example, there was a continuing search for teachers with dual certification in elementary education and Spanish. A great deal of attention was paid to ensuring that the Spanish program was incorporated into the regular curriculum of the primary school with a minimum of disruption. Care was taken to provide assistance to the Spanish teachers through continuing linkage with the university partners and for classroom teachers by the systematic provision of in-service training. Respondents noted that the Spanish teachers also had the support of the classroom teachers.

Concerns for the future. The most resounding theme reflected a realization that issues of articulation from elementary school to middle school and from middle school to high school will be critical if the district is to have a coherent and viable foreign language program across 13 years of instruction. Several respondents mentioned the need to re-think the language curriculum in the middle school (Grades 6-8) and high school (Grades 9-12) to accommodate students who have studied a foreign language throughout elementary school. As the chairperson of the high school foreign language department stated, "there will need to be drastic changes in the curriculum in the later years of schooling," but she hastened to add that she sees this "as a wonderful problem."

Conclusion

By telling the story of one district's lived experience with FLES, this digest has described key elements in the development of a successful educational innovation. The direction and decisions of this district rested on concerns of several important constituents and reflect Markee's (1997) observation that innovative projects are affected, positively or negatively, by complex sociocultural variables, such as cultural beliefs; political climate; historical and economic conditions; administrative attitudes; institutional support; and technological, sociolinguistic, and language planning factors. When viewed globally, the themes of vision, planning, empowerment, support, and future concerns described above reflect all of the sociocultural variables listed by Markee and attest to their importance, as well as the need to acknowledge and address openly these factors when designing and implementing new programs. Others in the process of contemplating the development of a program such as the one presented here, or in monitoring and evaluating current FLES programs, might well be advised to benchmark successes and failures against these themes.

References

Carroll, J. B. (1967). *The foreign language attainments of language majors in the senior year: A survey conducted in U.S. colleges and universities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Graduate School of Education.

Curtain, H. A., & Dahlberg, C. (2000). *Planning for success: Common pitfalls in the planning of early foreign language programs* (ERIC Digest). Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics.

Donato, R., & Terry, R. M. (Eds.). (1995). *Foreign language learning: The journey of a lifetime*. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook.

Markee, N. (1997). *Managing curricular innovation* New York: Cambridge.

This digest was prepared with funding from the U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Library of Education, under contract no. ED-99-CO-0008. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of ED, OERI, or NLE.